

Literary Representations of The Great Barrier Reef

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Introduction

In 1626 Samuel Purchas published an anthology of travel stories which included an account by François Pyrard de Laval of his shipwreck on a coral reef in the Maldives for 5 years in the first decade of the seventeenth century. Purchas translates Laval's account of the coral atolls as follows:

All the shallowes are stone, Rocke and sand, so that when the tide is out, it reacheth not to ones waste, and for the most part to the mid-legge; so that is were very easie to goe wihtout a Boate throughout all the Isles of the same Atollon, if it were not for two causes. The one great fishes called Paimones, which devoure men and breake their legges and armes, when they encounter them; the other is that the depths of the Sea are generally very keene and sharpe Rockes which hurt them wonderfully that goe into it. And moreover they meete with many branches of a certaine thing which I know not whether to terme Tree or Rocke, it is not much unlike white Corall, which is also branched and piercing, but altogether polished; on the contrary, this is rugged, all hollow and pierced with little holes and passages, yet abides hard and ponderous as a stone. (Purchas, vol IX, 509)

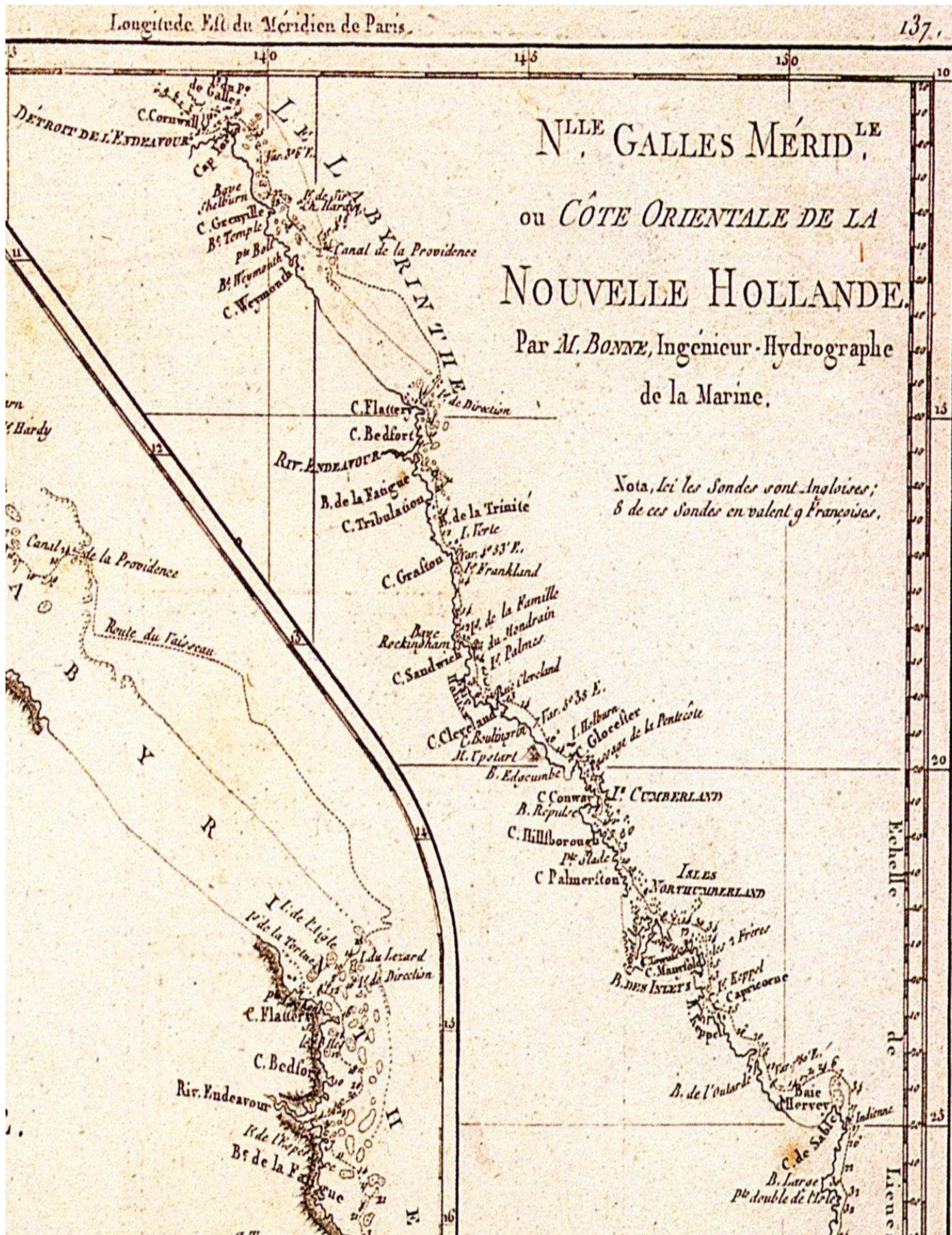
'Death by coral' was a fate exotic and dramatic enough to enter into Shakespeare's imagination in his late play *The Tempest*, probably finished in 1610-1611. As Ferdinand laments his father's supposed death, Ariel sings in his ear:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange. (Act 1, Scene 2)

Australian poet James McAuley, in "Captain Quiros", his long poem about the failed attempt by Quiros to claim the South Land, uses the image of a drowned sailor on a coral reef to image Quiros's defeat:

Can this be all that the great Ocean gave,
A doubtful glory and a broken rite?
Spears of the sun lie shattered in the wave;
Hope into history sinks out of sight
Like a drowned sailor on a coral reef
Where dish with flash of scarlet and goldleaf
And lapis-lazuli take watery flight. (McAuley 164)

Bowen and Bowen point out that: "a formidable record of shipwrecks from hidden obstacles and coral reefs had become commonplace in navigating circles. In increasing numbers these were becoming published in sensational stories of voyages to exotic, strange lands in the era of imperial expansion from the sixteenth through to the eighteenth century" (Bowen and Bowen 12). The historical origins of European interest in coral reefs, then begins in that period of exploration when they were hazards to be feared, dangerous obstacles to voyaging at a time when one of the enduring puzzles was the existence of a Great South Land, depicted on early maps as Terra Australis. In *Java la Grande: The Portuguese Discovery of Australia* (1984) Lawrence Fitzgerald, established that one of the earliest maps of Australia, made in Arques near the port of Dieppe by Pierre Desceliers in 1550 was based on a map by a Portuguese mariner. In the southern hemisphere there is a shape meant to designate Australia, and on the eastern coast a series of marks which Fitzgerald has identified as accurate references to the islands of the Whitsundays and the Great Barrier Reef at Cape Tribulation (Fitzgerald 124). The map labels these features as *R. beaucoup d'isles* and *Coste dangereuse*. It's possible that mariners deliberately avoided this "coste dangereuse" for 200 years, for it was not until James Cook's Endeavour voyage of 1768-1771 that the coast was charted, and the first reliable accounts of the Great Barrier Reef were written by Cook, Joseph Banks and others on the voyage. Cook referred to the Coste dangereuse in his maps as a labyrinth, a name adopted by subsequent cartographers such as Rigobert Bonne in 1788.



Rigobert Bonne, Nlle Galles Meridle. ou Cote Orientale de la Nouvelle Hollande (1788) from Robert Clancy, *The Mapping of Terra Australis*. Macquaire Park: Universal Press, 1995. p. 98

Unlike modern scientific accounts of the Reef, the journals of explorers often move between personal and impersonal topics, between objective and subjective modes, and their discourse is charged with the wonder and awe of seeing for the first time. This is certainly the case with the journals which were published after James Cook's Endeavour voyage of 1768-1771. Much of the contents of the journals are given over to dispassionate description not to say nauticalese such as the following:

Friday 10th Fresh gales at SSE and SEBS. In the PM the wind fell so as we got up the small bower Anchor and hove in to a whole Cable on the best bower. At 3 o'clock in the morning we got up the lower yards and at 7 weigh'd and stood in for the land intending to seek a passage along shore to the northward having a Boat ahead sounding, depth of water as we run in from 19 to 12 fathom: after standing in an hour we edge'd away for 3 small Island that lay NNE 1/2 E 3 Leagues from Cape Bedford, to these Islands the Master had been in the Pinnace when the Ship was in Port; At 9 o'clock we were abreast of them and between them and the Main having another low Island between us and the latter which lies WNW, 4 Miles from the Three Island in this Channell had 14 fathom water: the northermost Point of the Main we had in sight bore from us NNW 1/2 W distant 2 Leagues. Four or 5 Leagues to the NE of this head land appear'd three high Islands with some smaller ones near them and the Shoals and reefs without us we could see extending to the northward as far as these Islands: we directed our Course between them and the above headland leaving a small Id to the Eastward of us which lies NBE 4 M. from ye 3 Ids having all the while a boat ahead sounding.

(<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-cook-17700810>)

But when it came to the legendary 'coste dangereuse' Cook's tone becomes more personal. His journal reveals that he was well aware of the dangers of the reef, especially north of Cape Tribulation "because here begun all our troubles" (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-cook-17700610>). Throughout the navigation of the Queensland coast the soundings revealed increasingly dramatic depth changes, varying from over 20 fathoms to three or four, and sometimes a mere few feet, in the space of a few minutes. At 15°45' South, the Endeavour struck the reef, and frantic attempts were made to lighten her as she took on water. With the pumps failing -Cook's laments: "This was an alarming and I may say terrible, circumstance

and threatend immidiate destruction to us as soon as the Ship was afloat”

(<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-cook-17700612>). Similarly Hawkesworth says “this was a dreadful circumstance, so that we anticipated the floating of the ship not as an earnest of deliverance, but as an event that would probably precipitate our destruction”

(<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-hv23-548>)

Hawkesworth again:

We well knew that our boats were not capable of carrying us all on shore, and that when the dreadful crisis should arrive, as all command and subordination would be at an end, a contest for preference would probably ensue, that would increase the horrors even of shipwreck, and terminate in the destruction of us all by the hands of each other; yet we knew that if any should be left on board to perish in the waves, they would probably suffer less upon the whole than those who should get on shore, without any lasting or effectual defence against the natives, in a country, where even nets and firearms would scarcely furnish them with food; and where, if they should find the means of subsistence, they must be condemned to languish out the remainder of life in a desolate wilderness, without the possession, or even hope, of any domestic comfort, and cut off from all commerce with mankind, except the naked savages who prowled the desert, and who perhaps were some of the most rude and uncivilized upon the earth. To those only who have waited in a state of such suspense, death has approached in all his terrors; and as the dreadful moment that was to determine our fate came on, every one saw his own sensations pictured in the countenances of his companions...(http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-hv23-549)



On Friday 22 June 1770 Cook beaches the damaged Endeavour in the river which was to take the barks name, and he observes the damage:

At 2 oClock in the AM the tide left her which gave us an oppertunity to examine the leak which we found to be at her floor heads a little before the Starboard fore chains - here the rocks had made their way thro' four Planks, quite to and even into the timbers and wound'd three more. the manner these planks were damaged or cut out as I may say is hardly credable - scarce a splinter was to be seen, but the whole was cut away as if it had been done by the hands of Man with a blunt edge tool - fortunately for us the timbers in this place were very close other wise it would have been impossible to have saved the ship and even as it was it appear'd very extraordinary that she did not made no more water than what she did - A large piece of Coral rock was sticking in one hole and several pieces of the fothering, small stones, sand &Ca had made its way in and lodged between the timbers which had stoped the water from forceing its way in in great quantities. (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-cook-17700622>)

After many days spent repairing the hull, Cook, surveying the coast from a nearby hilltop refers to the 'Melancholy' prospect of finding a passage through the reef, and after still more days of probing the labyrinthine reef Cook is again in danger ("the very jaws of distruction" he says) near Lizard island:

All the dangers we had escaped were nothing little in comparison of being thrown upon this Reef where the Ship must be dashed to peices in a Moment, a Reef such a one as is here spoke of is scarcely known in Europe it is a wall of Coral Rock rising all most perpendicular out of the unfathomable Ocean always overflowen at high-water generally 7 or 8 feet and dry in places at Low-water, the large waves of the vast Ocean meeting with so sudden a resistance makes a most terrible surf breaking mountains high especially as in our case when the general trade wind blowes directly upon it. (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-cook-17700816>)

Banks too comments on the perilous nature of coral reefs: "we were little less than certain that we were upon sunken coral rocks, the most dreadfull of all others on account of their sharp points and grinding quality which cut through a ships bottom almost immediately" (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-banks-17700610>). The destructive power of coral is also noted by Hawksworth: "we were upon a rock of coral, which is more fatal than any other, because the points of it are sharp, and every part of the surface so rough as to grind away whatever is rubbed against it, even with the gentlest motion" (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-hv23-545>). Banks is similarly moved: "Now was our case truly desperate, no man I beleive but who gave himself intirely over, a speedy death was all we had to hope for and that from

the vastness of the Breakers which must quickly dash the ship all to peices was scarce to be doubted. Other hopes we had none: the boats were in the ship and must be dashd in peices with her..." (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-banks-17700816>).

Parkinson also observes that "this labyrinth of islands we passed with some difficulty, on account of the number of shoals which we met with" (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-parkinson-185>), and on striking the reef he observes:

About eleven, the ship struck upon the rocks, and remained immoveable. We were, at this period, many thousand leagues from our native land, (which we had left upwards of two years,) and on a barbarous coast, where, if the ship had been wrecked, and we had escaped the perils of the sea, we should have fallen into the rapacious hands of savages. Agitated and surprised as we were, we attempted every apparent eligible method to escape, if possible, from the brink of destruction. (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-parkinson-186>)

When Banks comes to explore the reef, he says:

As we were now safe at an anchor it was resolvd to send the boats upon the nearest shoal to search for shell fish, turtle or whatever else they could get. They accordingly went and Dr Solander and myself accompanied them in my small boat. In our way we met with two water snakes, one 5 the other 6 feet long; we took them both; they much resembled Land snakes only their tails were flatted sideways, I suppose for the convenience of swimming, and were not venomous. The shoal we went upon was the very reef we had so near been lost upon yesterday, now no longer terrible to us; it afforded little provision for the ship, no turtle, only 300lb of Great cockles, some were however of an immense size. We had in the way of curiosity much better success, meeting with many curious fish and mollusca besides Corals of many species, all alive, among which was the *Tubipora musica*. I have often lamented that we had not time to make proper observations upon this curious tribe of animals but we were so intirely taken up with the more conspicuous links of the chain of creation as fish, Plants, Birds &c &c. that it was impossible. (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-banks-17700817>)

Like Banks, Parkinson has a passing interest in the flora and fauna of the reef:

During the time we staid here, we picked up a great many natural curiosities from the reef we struck upon, consisting of a variety of curious shells, most of which were entirely new to Mr. Banks and Dr. Solander. We met also with many new species of fish. Madreporas and other

curious corals; sea-weed and other beautiful marine productions.(<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-parkinson-188>)

And on the 17th of August:

The reefs were covered with a numberless variety of beautiful corallines of all colours and figures, having here and there interstices of very white sand. These made a pleasing appearance under water, which was smooth on the inside of the reef, while it broke all along the outside, and may be aptly compared to a grove of shrubs growing under water. Numbers of beautiful coloured fishes make their residence amongst these rocks, and may be caught by hand on the high part of the reef at low water. There are also crabs, molusca of various sorts, and a great variety of curious shell-fish, which adhere to the old dead coral that forms the reef. (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.cs-ss-jrnl-parkinson-198>)

The journals then, although they provided ground-breaking accounts of the geographical details, indigenous people, and flora and fauna of the continent, largely ignored the reef except for reinforcing its perils for navigators. All commentators speak in almost biblical terms: surprised, 'alarmed' 'destruction', and 'redemption' 'great violence' 'scenes of distress' 'excessive fatigue of body and agitation of mind ' in describing the navigation of the Great Barrier Reef. Versed as these English gentlemen were in the classics, their experiences of the reef no doubt brought to mind intimations of the sublime, of which Edmund Burke had just written *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). The sublime was associated with great beauty in art and nature but also with terror:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer, are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasures which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensible body could enjoy...On closing this general view of beauty, it naturally occurs, that we should compare it with the sublime; and in this comparison there appears a remarkable contrast. For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be

smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates, it often makes a storong deviation; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure; and however they may vary afterwards from the direct nature of their causes, yet these causes keep up an eternal distinction between them...In the infinite variety of natural combinations we must expect to find the qualities of things most remote imaginable from each other united in the same object. (Leitch 550)

Over two centuries the sublime power of the Great Barrier Reef is gradually diminished in discourse, as naturalists become scientists and ecologists, as maritime navigation becomes less dangerous, as explorers became industrialists and tourists, and as poets, novelists philosophers and other imaginative thinkers and writers begin to turn their attention to exploring the beauty of the reef. A decisive point in this turn from the perilous labyrinthine dangerous sublime to the beautiful sublime occurs with the publication of E.J.Banfield's *Confessions of a Beachcomber* (1908), *My Tropic Isle* (1911), *Tropic Days* (1918) and *Last Leaves from Dunk Island* (1925). In his writings The Great Barrier Reef becomes a stage in which a play about how human beings might best relate to nature is acted out.

How have modern writers dealt with the imaginative heritage bequeathed to them through the discourses of Banks, Banfield and many others? Previously the present writer has looked at Di Morrissey's novel *The Reef* (see *etropic*, Volume 4 (2005)), and in this paper I look at three works set on the Great Barrier Reef: Mark O'Connor's *Reef Poems*, Rosaleen Love's non-fictional *Reefscape: Reflections on the Great Barrier Reef*, and Naomi Mairu's children's story *The Dugong Meadow*.

Reef Poems

Mark O'Connor wrote *Reef Poems* between 1972 and 1976 after spending some time on Dunk Island. More poems on the subject appeared after he became writer-in-residence at James Cook University in 1982. Although he read English and classics at the University of Melbourne, he is a keen self-taught biologist and conservationist, and much of his poetry shows an abiding concern for the Australian environment. His *Collected Poems* includes sections titled "Blue Mountains", "Forest Country", "Tilting at Snowgums-Poems of the

Australian Alps", "The Centre", and "Kakadu and the Top End" as well as "Reef Poems". His editor, John Leonard, in his introduction to the *Collected Poems* says of his earlier works that they "explore the Great Barrier Reef, a region at that time barely emerged from being 'nowhere / on the possessable globe', and they do so with ecological precision. Intellectual and sensuous discovery is their theme, joy their groundnote" (O'Connor 11).

The poems written as a response to O'Connor's first experiences of the Reef do stress a joy more intense than a tourist's delight. In "Arrival on Heron Island, 1975" the poet begins:

Such was my prayer:

a shack tucked under palm and Pisonia;
on an island a quarter-mile long
where the boat calls weekly with mail;
a bed, two blankets, cool cement floor
and shared cooking cabin, a dinghy to use,
and blessed release from current world news. (O'Connor 20)

The isolation from the affairs of the world is part of the joy:

Sated with sand and green
I write lazy fatuous postcards:
'having a wonderful time
wish Mao and Chou and Ford and Brezhnev
were here, looking at sea-stars--'
I plan to be happy here. (O'Connor 21)

"First Evening" also concludes in empathy with the environment, after naming the trees which will shelter the poet on his first evening:

Casuarina, sand-seizer, whose vertical leaves
shed the sunstrike below; Tournefortia, treelet
of dunes, turtle-blasted salt-sufferer; Pisonia,
bird-trapping oak; and Pandanus, gaunt clinger of rocks.
Be the friends of my stay. (O'Connor 20)

The trees here will protect the visitor, but their evolutionary significance is not missed either: the Casuarina stabilizes the sand and directs the sunlight; the Tournefortia can live in salty soil; the Pisonia is a host for nesting birds, and the Pandanus is able to grow in rock. Naming is an important part of O'Connor's poetic conceptualization of the environment. Getting botanical or zoological terminology and scientific insight into a poetic discourse is not the easiest thing to do, but O'Connor manages to do this consistently well.

Two more poems deal with the shape and rhythm of human living on islands of the Reef, "For E.J.Banfield" and "Planting the Dunk Botanic Gardens". "For E.J.Banfield" is O'Connor's tribute to his 'miglior fabbro', to one of the first writers to give imaginative expression to the Reef. O'Connor reflects on the brevity of his stay on Dunk Island, compared to Banfield's thirty years:

What are my strenuous weeks of visit
to this man's thirty years--
his time to muse with shoals and tides
pipe-lost on every log and headland,
to praise the pawpaw and the pomelo
swooning in drunk, bat-fossicked flowers,
to plant the mangosteen and litchi. I see
his hand, pressed to a rough-hewn table,
turn the light nectar of a season
to the honey of considered prose. (O'Connor 26)

Banfield's love of nature allows him to turn his experiences into the "honey of considered prose" but his thirty years also demonstrate a non-destructive way of living in harmony with nature, while being nurtured and nourished by it:

A journalist, half blind and warned of death,
who hired the world's loveliest island
in days when the great Reef lay nowhere
on the possessable globe-he became
the serene prose-singer of Coonanglebah's sands
and lord of the tide-linked islands; one
of a pair who bred no clan, and sought

no wealth, learning through love
that Aboriginal trick, to leave the land
beyond their life untouched. (O'Connor 26)

"Planting the Dunk Botanic Gardens" is a much longer poem, which begins with O'Connor's arrival on Dunk Island. "I found Coonanglebah, old Banfield's home, first / gardened by that one-eye man, tough, English / --and ant-vigorous, like all islanders that last" (38). Despite thirty years of planting exotic fruits, Banfield's work is now "hacked, bulldozed, overgrown, and known to only two or three" (38). This is O'Connor's opportunity:

I came in a later, greedy time,
chasing work on the tourist farm.
Found the manager. Delivered myself
a perfect barman, chef's hand-or gardener.
He saw the place as a marlin fisherman's hide-away,
but it needed shrubs. The job was mine,
with a brief to prove all arts are learnt by doing. (O'Connor 38-39)

The poem goes on to relate how O'Connor talks the manager (Evenings, as if the heat could melt him, he inhabited / the swimming pool like a giant frog / --a curse on midnight nudists (40)) into creating a botanic garden. The manager is enthusiastic when he sees that the gardens could be a tourist attraction, but there is some opposition:

Yet in every Terran garden you appropriate
lurks the offended snake whose turf you've taken.
Mine was the works-foreman, earth-machinery-master;
...Immune to green
and gardens, a creature of drought; like a mole
he'd built and unbuilt the resort's terrain
to a dozen managers' whims, content only to stay. (O'Connor 46-47)

Nevertheless, the planting starts just as the monsoon arrives. Section V, entitled "Islanders" is an amusing account of the staff of the island resort, but most of the poem traces the gradual growth into maturity of the re-planted flora. Section VII, "The Butterfly Tunnel" begins:

The isle had two giant butterflies:
Cairns Birdwing, a psychedelic eight-inch insect fit
for a fairy toadstool; and Papilio
Ulysses, blue as a flake of heaven, a summer day's
epiphany of azure coruscations;
alarmed they fly like sparrowhawks, yet come
to a blue umbrella or dead comrade's wing. (O'Connor 45-46)

To attract the butterflies O'Connor plants "food-plants of every bright-winged butterfly...the dracaenas, difenbachias, calatheas, ferns through which Ulysses danced" (46). Section IX deals with "Defeats" such as delays in the supply of plants, destruction of plantings by cyclones (" Queensland is littered with men's broken dreams" 949)). O'Connor's commission ends and he envisages that much of his work will be neglected. The poem concludes:

Later, in Italy , I heard the news:
'Your trees are well', the Hermit wrote, 'except
some unstaked ones the cyclone got. There
was lots of neglect after you left-it still
goes on. New staff--new manager--new plans
--all too depressing. But round this side my garden
grows, and life is good. Bananas great!' I see him
carry in a shoulder-bowing bunch; a green pawpaw, secure
from fruit-bats, matures beside his loom. Happy
who live among their riches . . .! I guessed without interpreter
my vines left wire-less, orders cancelled, trees
unknown before in Queensland rotting on dry wharves,
and in some bright board-member's mind the thought
that doubling guests and golfcourse is the way
to make investment pay. All was foreseen, and known;
since gardeners are suspicious, patient; only
the trees go on growing in my mind. (O'Connor 51)

The works discussed so far focus on immediate impressions of and reactions to the more obvious features of the Reef. But O'Connor's work also explores the less tangible, more mythological and philosophical aspects of the environment. Although colourful and dense,

yet precise and detailed descriptions of nature provide a rich surface texture to his poems, "interwoven with those externals...are frequent, sensitive insights into the nature of existence itself" (Wilde, Hooton and Andrews 588). In "The Rainbow Serpent" O'Connor creates a panorama of the North Queensland coast and the adjacent Reef from an Aboriginal mythological perspective. The significance of "Mt Bowen", "Rock", "Giant Fig", "Mangrove", "Sandcrabs", "Monsoon", "Fungus" and "Fire" are all seen as manifestation of "Tch'mala: The Rainbow Serpent" (33-34). The most complex revelation of the Rainbow serpent's immanence is seen in the last in the last two section of the poem:

XI. Hinchinbrook Aborigines

Generations beyond guess of naked children
have splashed on this lost beach,
left its sands for the inheritors.
Tracks were a teacher's ornate map
erased by time. Every tale recurred.

The land was flesh, and magic.
You blended with its power, held its rules;
were full when it would feed you, lost
your children when it pruned you back.

Its hardness never staled until
the ghost-men brought an easier way.

XII. Earth

Mine the face on which you trample.
Mine the bones by which you live. (O'Connor 37)

O'Connor's work sometimes gives a strongly anthropomorphic view of the environment, which is at odds with postmodern environmental ethics. According to Johathan Smith in "Ethics and the Human Environment":

Belief in a personalized, spirit-haunted world started to fade in the sixteenth century when some educated Europeans began to view the environment as a collection of inanimate objects mindlessly moved by mechanical processes, rather like the works of a clock. This shift from an anthropomorphic to mechanistic ethical vision has continued down to the present...The sociologist Max Weber described this shift as the 'the disenchantment of the world'...Disenchantment reduces nature to brute matter (quantification) that can be mastered (technology), and that there is no reason not to master (desanctification) if humans value this manipulation (anthropocentrism). At the very best, then, there is no ethical significance to environmental modifications that do not positively harm human values. Environmental manipulation by a person who views the world through this ethical lens is constrained and obliged only by consideration of the interests of other human beings. (Smith 214-16)

In "Island" the island itself speaks of its self-creation and evolution:

sea bore (me).

tides doused (me) & drained. sun

greyed (me), reef greened (me) around. old

shoal of dead coral they thought (me)

their plaything to move as they bound.

deep round (me) was ocean & luscious and full.

was (i) warmth, had (i) length, was (i) wide,

was (i) growing womb, full of bones? was

(i) cyst, this life inside death, seed of life

in all others' death?

earth heaved. ocean sank. (i)-was (i) me?-(i)

grew high. one day (before i) they had found

(me) too heavy to move. now

ocean slides past & i stay. (O'Connor 29)

The island continues to narrate its development: as the coral breaks down to sand, it begin to emerge from the water; birds inhabit it and "their hot droppings quickened my sand. / Their rich siftings woke me, I stirred. / I grew fertile, then eager, I waiting a seed" (30); grasses,

then various species of trees become established; and with them the birds. Finally the island is fully formed, and now protected by the reef from which it took its life. Lastly:

I lie back sound

While the Men come, my Lastlings, my Toys, full of Qualms,
Snared by Its Aura, Our Poise, trailing Peacocks and Palms,
Gasping deep for our Peace;--yet rejected each Year when It boasts
Out Its Lifehooks, Its Glue-seeds unguessed, chokes Its Hosts,
Liming too Minds of Men in the unglibbed Web of Life. (O'Connor, 33)

O'Connor is particularly impressed by the Mutton birds, Frigate birds, Gannets and Terns which inhabit the island. He marvels at the navigational abilities which direct the bird from "Guam and Alaska / circling the globe at their thirty knots" (22) to a mate on a single small branch on an island in the Great Barrier Reef:

Hard to guess--in the wing-jostled screaming confusion
swept to confettied conflagration on the island thermals
each flake has its vision of home,
its tape of directions.

Bound to a branchlet, a single mate
after skimming the world. (O'Connor 19)

The aerial acrobatics of birds are another source of amazement, as in "Strike" from "Two Views of a Gannet" where the bird plunges at high speed "eighty feet deep" to capture a fish:

2. Strike

In this moment
while the fish is dying
the gannet turns and peels over
out of his holding pattern, flips & capsizes &
falls headlong in the foreshortened distance,
as a stone dropped from some monstrous headland seems
as one leans
to dawdle midway in its plummet.

Wings flutter at first, then cease,
held back strut-stiff in the slip-stream
punch and buffet of the kicking air.
Then still falling, vertical, he is flipped
like a paper dart flung at a fan,
spun like a loosened weathercock
90 degrees on his axis, yet
vertical still, and able
to spin and fix again, and then
again, and again, and still, still
still the plunge goes on,
now in this moment/last second
now while the sun strikes
and the swell gathers
and the gannet is falling
and the fish is dying. (O'Connor 28)

The sheer number of birds ("Four million on their half-mile beach" (22) is also emphasized:
Mutton Birds leaving the island for "the other pole" thicken the sky:

...galaxied beyond galaxy
in an infinite regress of size; aloof
and enviable
since words are all we have of wings. (O'Connor 25)

This feeling is captured in Frank Hurley's photo below:



O'Connor's struggle to make language speak of the world has been noted by Leonard: " To verbalize an environment always involves appropriation. We are bound to the fact that language is of the human species and of particular cultures. Environmentalism, though, seeks not to disengage from nature but to touch it with an understanding of its complexities-and our own. This both-ways understanding is the point at which O'Connor works" (O'Connor 12). "The Pairing of Terms" is particularly illustrative of this latter point: how can language translate the mating of terms into a theme of human significance:

Human lovers know it only in dreams
the wild mating flight of the terns
riding the weird and unguessable surf of the air,
blown round the compass, locked
in pairs by invisible steel...(13)

In their flight the terns are metaphors for human love, says O'Connor:

Their love is everything for which we have only metaphors,
peaks and abysses, stallings and dizzying speeds
wild oceans of distance, and feathertip closenesses,

and wingbeats that answer so swiftly none knows
which struck first, which called and which answered.
They were circling the globe when our fathers still
cringed from the monsters beyond the next hamlet. (O'Connor 14).

In "A Cuttlefish Bone" the paradoxical fact that the cuttlefish 'wears its shell inside' is considered, after a description of its exquisite but functional shape, and then the illumination that it is not so different from us:

Strange!
so perfect a shape inside another.
She says 'It's what we mammals use'
thin skin, large brains,
and something hard within. (O'Connor 60)

Finally, O'Connor gives us a few glimpses of the underwater realm in "The Diver" with its sumptuous vocabulary both lyrical and technical, and in "The Beginning". The latter poem imagines the creation of the Great Barrier Reef in terms of the biblical story of Genesis. The poem shows god feeling that " Eden was not nearly complex enough" and deliberately setting out to create something grander:

And he said:
`Let species swarm like solutes in a colloid.
Let there be ten thousand species of plankton
and to eat them a thousand zooplankton.
Let there be ten phyla of siphoning animals,
one phylum of finned vertebrates, from
white-tipped reef shark to long-beaked coralfish,
and to each his proper niche..., (O'Connor 16)

God's view of complexity includes predation:

`In conclusion, I want,' he said
`ten thousand mixed chains of predation-
none of your simple rabbit and coyote stuff!

This ocean shall have many mouths, many palates. I want,
say, a hundred ways of death, and three thousand of regeneration--
all in technicolor naturally. And oh yes, I nearly forgot,
we can use Eden again for the small coral cay in the center. (O'Connor 16)

In this brief and concentrated 'divine comedy' all life emerges as sacred:

For five and a half days God labored
and on the seventh he donned mask and snorkel
and a pair of bright yellow flippers.

And, later, the host all peered wistfully down
through the high safety fence around Heaven
and saw God with his favorites finning slowly over the coral
in the eternal shape of a grey nurse shark,
and they saw that it was very good indeed.

Saltwater Spirituality

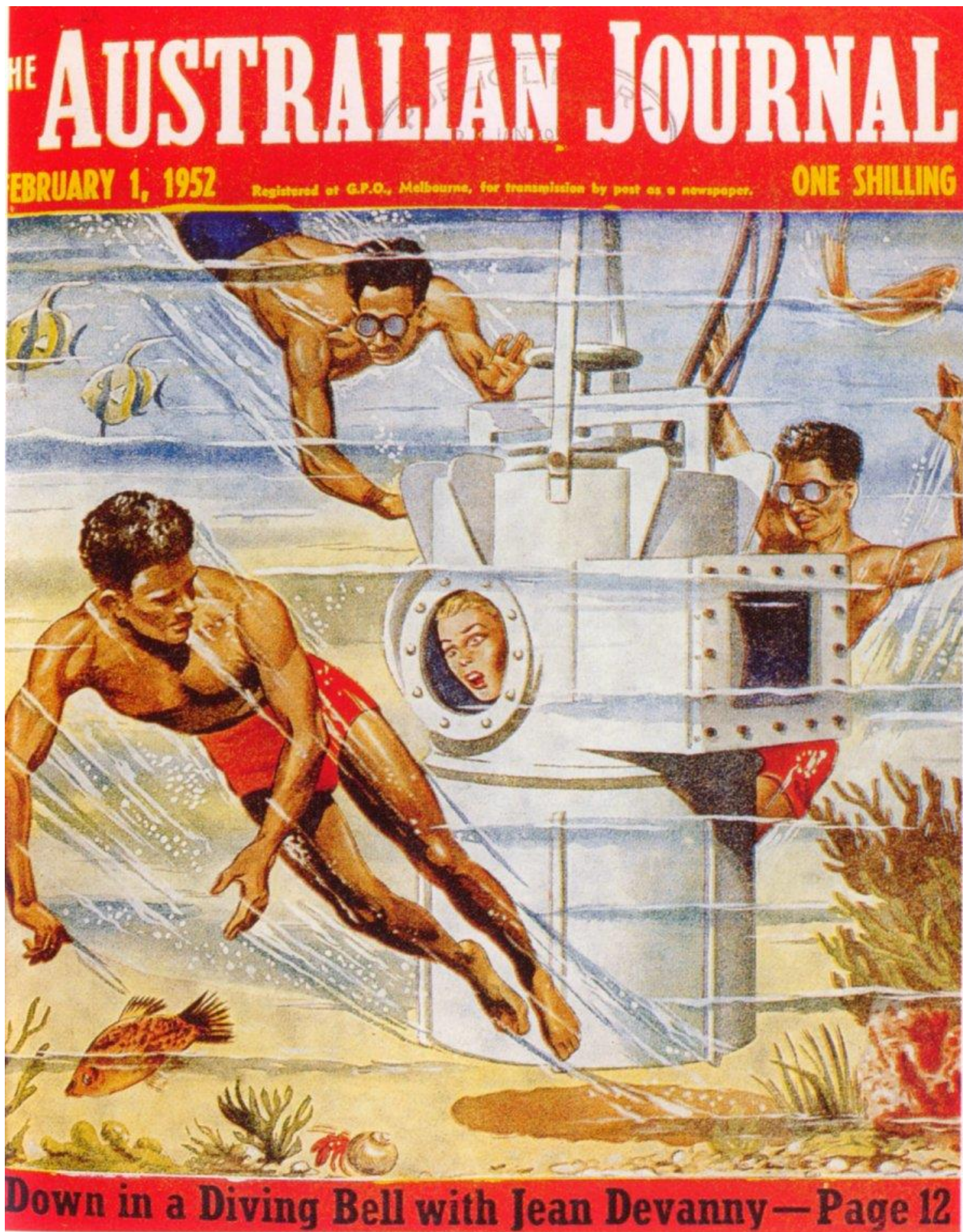
Rosaleen Love's *Reefscape: Reflections on the Great Barrier Reef* was published in 2000. Love has taken the insights of Aboriginals, scientists, novelists, explorers, journalists, tourists and many others, and refracted these through her own experiences and reflections to construct her vision of the meaning of nature for human beings. Love says "It is not so much the reef as it exists in and of itself that I want to explore in the pages that follow, though it will of course be part of the story. It is more the meaning of the Great Barrier Reef as it is encountered in danger, work, fun, or the search for sustenance" (Love 5-6).

One of Love's first observations is that 'Reefscape' inverts our experiential sense of landscape: "Reefscape is where the rocks are living, plants grow downwards, the sky glows through a refracting barrier of water, and there is no air save that which humans take with them. On land, wildlife flees the human encounter, underwater, fishes move largely indifferent to human intrusion. Reefscape provides quite a different encounter with wildness" (6). In sensitive encounters with nature, continues Love, 'delight in nature' displaces self-consciousness with a form of 'disembodied pleasure' (60). This dissolution of self-awareness is intensified underwater:

Viewing underwater increases the displacement of self. People must brave the transition between the element of air and the element of water, the moment when two different worlds join...I am suspended in warm water as if I were a part of it, entering into some kind of prehuman condition of flowingness. The history of human evolution rolls backwards for this moment of re-entry into the oceanic past, and the planktonic ego is liberated...Air and sky are left behind, the sea washes over, and it is a different self that dives down to meet whatever moves below. (Love 6)

Despite the fact that “film and video increasingly allow ever more impossible journeys into unimaginable places, like the interior of the coral polyp even as it spawns” Love says that there are limits to our ability to understand the Reef in material ways, but “reaching into reefscape through the imagination has few limits” (8).

Overcoming those physical limits is the story of “Diving for Oldies”. Embedded in the author’s narrative of her diving lessons, is the story of Jean Devanny’s first descent into the Great Barrier Reef at Green Island in a diving bell. Of her 25 feet descent Devanny wrote “I felt acutely alone, but as I was lowered away the amazing nature of the new experience effaced all consciousness of self” (27).



In the next section “Fishness” Love explores theories of fish-consciousness. For the diver, normal human perception and cognition are altered: “Sensory information is fed to the swimmer from all directions—up, down, sideways—differently from on land. Smell and taste become irrelevant...the sense of hearing is dulled underwater ...Weird, too, the sense of touch...It is the visual that overwhelms” (43-44). But what of the creatures of this environment: “How might fishes experience tides and currents, night and day, territory, food, reproduction, and death? How might they experience the reef, and how might their experience be different if reef corals grow from shipwrecks, or from piles of old tyres with which artificial reefs are now being created?” (44).

Love discusses the work of researchers in the field, concluding that it is hard for humans not to project their own patterns of consciousness onto fish. One of the major differences between fish and humans lies in how they move about their domain; for fish, movement is often in schools: “they move together as if choreographed with the dancer’s sense of unity and grace” and where humans hear only the gurgling of their own aqualungs, for ‘fishes there is no such thing as the silence of the deep...the reef fish has an excellent sense of hearing” (50) Despite the difficulty Love decides: “Yet it is worth a try, to imagine what it is like to live in a state of different sensory awareness, without the capacity for self-awareness but with a kind of school-awareness. Perhaps it would be like having a sense of community without a sense of self” (51). Could such insights be relevant to human life. Love speculates:

Fishes as they move in schools, move as ‘dividuals’ all. They show there are ways of living cooperatively in groups that humans might like to ponder. There has been a time in the past history of humans on earth when they first learned to gather in groups around a camp fire. In the future, people will gather differently together. We’re not going to end up fishes, but we may end up relating differently, and possibly better, as dividuals all. (52)

Can humans communicate with these ‘dividuals’ asks Love. Obviously, not in language, but when one observes a fish, eyeball to eyeball, she says, “the return of the gaze means something” (52), it means seeing fish as something more than a meal. And it is particularly obvious with larger marine creatures, whales, dolphins, dugongs, and even sharks, that they respond to humans. Tourist operators bring people to spots on the reef where these animals often appear, and in turn, these animals often appear to view the tourists. Are they experiencing the same curiosity as humans?

Yet another distinctive aspect of bodily sensation underwater is explored in “Going with the Flow”:

Drifting with the flow is an everyday fact of life in the ocean. The ambient medium is always in motion, and sea creatures harvest its power and direction to their own animal ends of survival. It is different for most land-based creatures, though spiders may drift in air, and microfauna, and sea eagles, frigate birds and glider pilots. For the most part, our feet are on the ground, and wind plays little part in everyday life. (58)

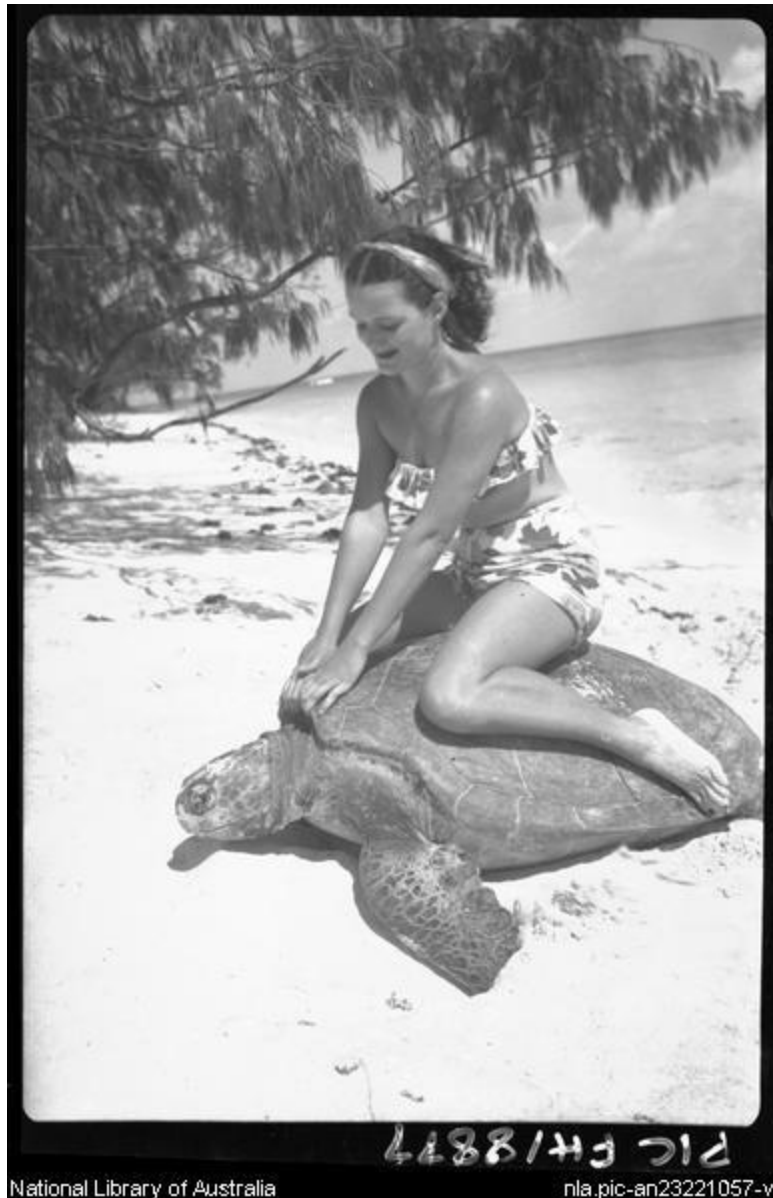
Love goes on to show how ‘going with the flow’ is the pervasive dynamic of the reef, absolutely essential to coral spawning, other forms of reproduction and even feeding and self-defence. Again, Love asks if this can be understood in human terms:

‘Going with the flow’ is a notion that helps in imagining the tensions between ourselves and nature, between what humans can control, and what controls us. The task is how best to gain knowledge of the limits set by the natural world, and to work out ways of moving appropriately within those limits. Corals provide an exemplar. They take nourishment from the water. They flow with the water and make use of it. They build defenses against it. In death their skeletons contribute to the structure through which water penetrates, and around which it must divert itself. (65)

As well as looking forward to the part the reef might play in future communities, in “When the Reef Was Ours” Love discusses the feeling of possession felt by North Queenslanders until the second half of the twentieth century, when mass tourism to the reef began. The reef belonged to fishermen (professional and amateur), pearlers, mariners, trochus shell divers: “A man could be his own boss and lord of the sea. It was largely a man’s world, this reef. It was a do-as-you-please life” (89). The life was characterized by “a sense of plenty, a sense of adventure, a sense of danger, a sense of mateship...work, often exceptionally hard work, and pleasure [were] intertwined in memories of those times” (91). On the other hand, for “coastal Aboriginal people, there is the sense that ‘the reef is ours and always has been’, despite the European invasion, despite the tourist ‘infestation’” (91). Love observes that Europeans distinguish between land, on which an individual might own property, and the sea, on which one can not; but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders do not make such a distinction: “Land flows into the sea, and underneath it, where it becomes sea country. ‘Sea country’, as with ‘country’ more generally, has an immense cultural significance. It relates people to a place of

origin, to traditional values, resources, stories and cultural obligations. The sea as much as the land is the place from which these cultural relationships spring" (92). Love discusses how these different understandings of ownership of the sea complicate the interwoven questions of Aboriginal title and reef conservation.

As with so much writing about the reef, turtles hold a special fascination. The turtle-watching industry is a major component in tourism dollars, but the life of the female turtle is forlorn: "All the cards in nature's bundle of horrors are stacked against her" (115). In "The Tears of the Turtle" Love gives a scientifically informed but impassioned account of the turtle's struggle for survival against almost everything including being made into soup and ornaments. In keeping with her overall purpose in *Reefscape*, she comes to the conclusion that what the "heaving landscape of dead and dying turtles [on Raine Island] brings to mind is mortality in general, the transience of life mirrored in the turtle's" (126).



Love's last and most searching section is "Saltwater Spirituality". Here she probes the notion of what a spirituality of the reef might entail. In a modern predominantly secular world, what shape might spirituality take, and in what ways might the Great Barrier Reef be seen as having a spiritual dimension. First Love examines why such a question might be asked in the first place. She finds that on the experiential level, intimacy with the reef invokes an uncanny sense of presence. Noting that the two most popular tourist attractions in Australia are Uluru and the Great Barrier Reef ("the world's largest rock and the world's largest reef") (207) Love compares these to the holy shrines sought out by pilgrims. At Uluru, a message from the Anangu tribe says: "Tourists see the rock and they see it as an exceptionally large rock. But they should look into the rock and if they could do that they would see the spirit that lives there, and they will know about the rock" (207). Those who immerse themselves in the reef,

experience, as we've seen, a loss of self-awareness and a heightened sense of empathy with the environment. Love interprets this gut-feeling in more complex ways:

There are possibilities of rich connection between the self, the ocean, humans and planet Earth, the cosmos. The complexity and intricacy of reef life transforms, if only for the moment, the individual who enters into it and experiences the relation of part to whole. New ways of thinking about self and nature, self and culture emerge with others who experience similar strong feelings of interconnectedness. (211)

At the experiential level then, a minimal spirituality seems predicated, a "sense that there is something here that cannot be explained—mysteries, uncertainties, doubts, and also awe, inspiration. There is something that transcends my small experience and knowledge of the world" (212). One explanation for these feelings, says Love, might be found in Miroslav Holub's theory that the genome or 'Life Entity' links us to the evolutionary genetic processes of our planet and the cosmos, allowing the individual "to partake of something above the individual experience" to see ourselves "as a unit of something bigger" (212-213). Love concedes thought, that many people would not want to go beyond traditional religious views of spirituality, which she then proceeds to examine.

In searching for the varieties of religious spirituality the reef might speak of, Love finds that the aboriginals who dwell on the coasts of northern Australia call themselves the Sandbeach or Saltwater people" (216). As observed earlier these people believe the land flows seamlessly into the sea, which contains many sacred and mythological sites, although many of these remain secret knowledge, known only to the mappers and Aboriginal elders. For Aboriginal people the reef and the sea in general is charged with the spirits of their ancestors:

The Sandbeach people of Cape York say that before there were [people] the fish, animals and birds were all like human beings... They were spirit people, called Stories, and they established Aboriginal Law on the land they themselves created. Stories came to a place and settled down. They changed into rock and other features of the landscape and seascape, and are still there as the story places they named for themselves. The Pama today are descended from the Stories who still live on in their own places in the land and sea. The spirits of the ancestors, the Old People, still live in and on the land and sea in their special places. In death, spirit is restored to its place in landscape. The dead live on as spirits in their land and take an interest in what the living are doing. All the creatures, dugong, crayfish, turtle and snake

which are taken for food are not just food, but part of a complex web of significance which links people to place to the plants and animals living in that place... Humans and animals, land and sea, past and present are woven together, culture intertwined and never separate from nature. It is an animistic spirituality that provides a moral and ethical code by which to live. Core spiritual values live on in secret knowledge, ceremony, ritual and initiation practices not open to the outsider. (216-217)

Aboriginal beliefs differ significantly from European and Christian views, especially regarding the religious significance of animals and the natural world. Still, as Love points out, Christianity also has an explanation for the spiritual immanence of the created world. The sense that there is something 'sublime' in nature, something that "transcends the existence of the individual caught up in this particular time and place" can be grounded in a belief in God (222). She continues: "For many the sheer intricacies of reef relationships, and the grandeur of the structure as a whole point inevitably to a divine authorship." (223). For those who believe in a divine creator, deep sensitivity to the reef and nature is a way of knowing "what we are by means of what we are not" (223). But, maintains Love, this desire, "to know what we are by means of what we are not" is common to "swimmers and divers of whatever religious persuasion or lack of it" in fact, the reef's beauty and complexity "allows the non-believer imaginative space to take the notion of 'awe' seriously" (223).

This is Rosaleen Love's own position, as suggested in the conclusion of her study:

For those who find echoes of heavenly places in nature, the 'other-worldly' nature of the reef experience is a glimpse of Paradise. Or it can be more down to this earth, a sudden and overwhelmingly immediate perception of just where one stands on the continuum of life, as if a window was suddenly opened onto a hitherto closed part of the mind... For humanists, atheists and religious believers, whatever the ultimate cause, the moral and ethical issues remain. How people ought to live with respect to beauty and intricacy is important no matter what the religious persuasion, or lack of it. (223-24)

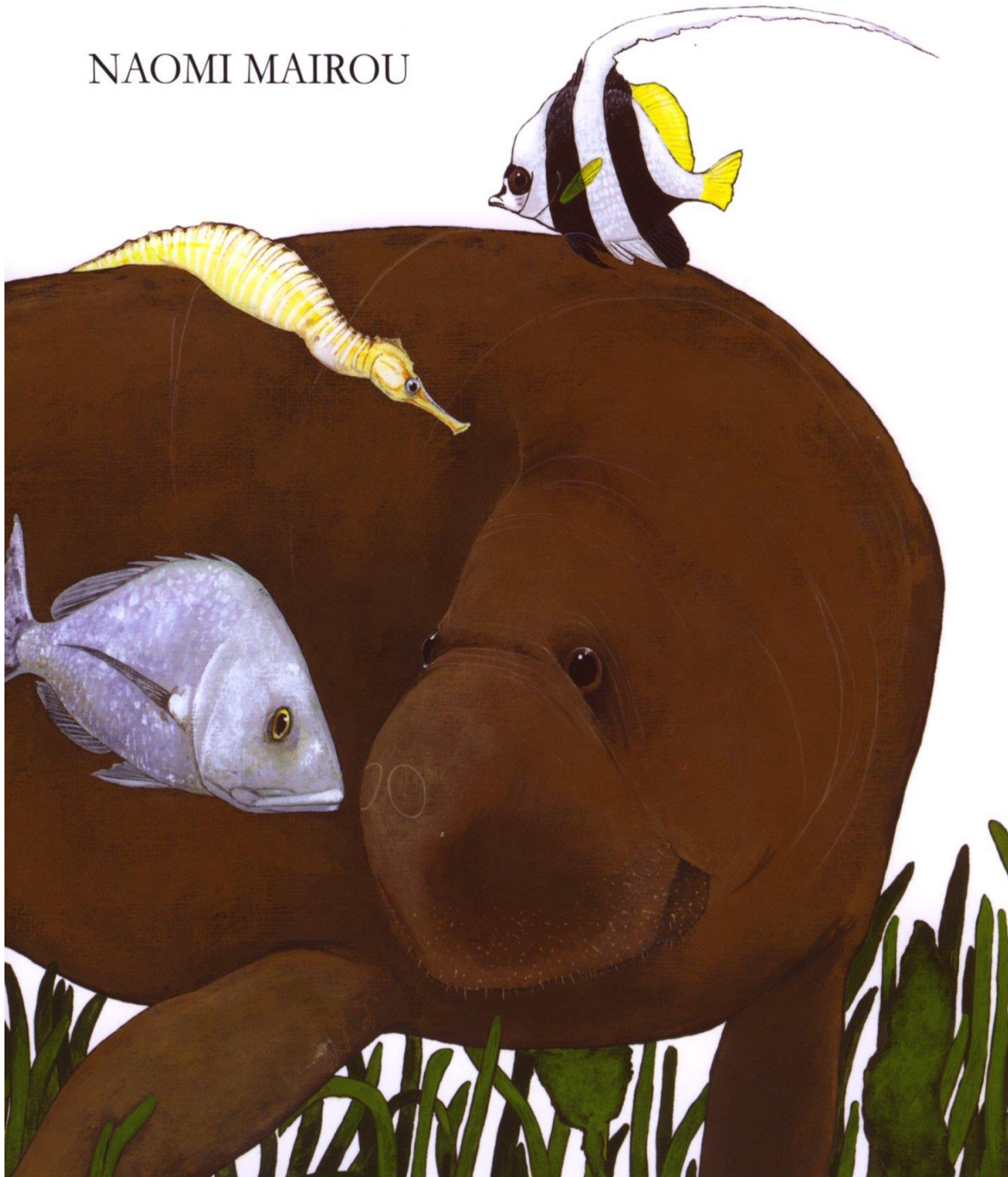
Death and Rebirth in The Dugong Meadow

Machan's Beach author and illustrator Naomi Mairou published *The Dugong Meadow*, an illustrated book for 7 to 10 year old children, in 2002. In 2003 the book won The Children's

Book Council of Australia Crichton Award and in the same year it was also shortlisted for The Wilderness Society Environment Award for Children's Literature.

The Dugong Meadow

NAOMI MAIROU



In an interview Mairou said:

"The book came about as an extension of something I was already involved in, a local campaign to help secure better protection for marine ecosystems. Modern commercial fishing practices are exceedingly cruel and incredibly destructive - a prawn trawler working over a patch of the ocean floor, using nets weighted by heavy chains that are dragged over the ocean floor, can remove just about every living thing in just a number of passes. This includes all sessile life like sponges and corals, and an incredible array of non-target species, including juveniles of many species, endangered marine reptiles like turtles, many species of sharks, rays, the lot. Fishermen have a brutal euphemism for the non-target species that kind of sums up their view on the whole thing - they call these animals 'trash' - and they are dumped back into the sea either dead or in the process of dying after going through the sorting tray on deck. Basically, if an animal has no monetary worth then its survival or death is of absolutely no consequence... but that is no different to the way in which humans view terrestrial animals either." (<http://www.vegansworldnetwork.org/van-news2004-9.html#DugongMeadowBookReview6/22/04>)

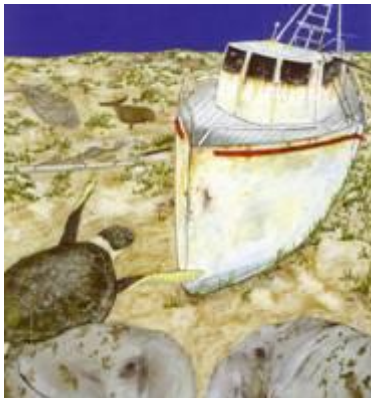
The large-format book consists of 26 full page colour illustrations with simple captions which convey the narrative. The first page (pages are not numbered) for example tells us: "Sunshine dapples the sandy seafloor. Warm currents ripple the seagrass. Gentle Dugong swims and plays with friendly fishes that share the meadow with him." Subsequent pages tell of the "rumbling or grumbling" presaging a trawl net which snaps coral, tears sponges, and crushes the seagrass.



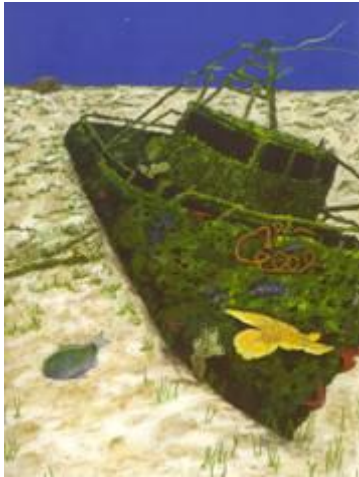
The "Gentle Dugong" and turtle try in vain to free the struggling fishes from the net as it ascends and disappears.



As the "Gentle Dugong sinks forlornly" he doesn't notice the descending darkness as the sun clouds over and a cyclone comes. The sea creatures go into hiding and eventually the air and water clear to reveal the trawler lying wrecked on the floor of the sea-grass meadow.



On its deck the dugong nudges its friends, "pale, limp fishes...the great ray" but they are lifeless. The "nervous lobsters", the moray eel, the cuttle and porcupine fish begin to explore the boat, which "sits there on the sand for a long time...and still Gentle Dugong hides terrified in the meadows."



After a while the turtle "makes her den beneath the gable of the boat's bow" and "sleepy sharks doze in shady places beside the hull." Eventually even the timid dugong swims in closer and sees "how sponges and corals cover the whole boat. They even grow in the bottles that spill from the boat's galley."



Finally "he sees that the fishing boat offers shelter for many creatures that live in the meadow. It is part of the meadow now."

Mairou says: "It is my fervent wish that other people might come to view marine animals (indeed all animals) as beings with lives as complex and valuable as their own" and in this story she gently illustrates how marine animals might 'feel' at the destruction of themselves and their environment if they thought as seven year old children. She also shows how the instrument of destruction ironically becomes a shelter for many of the creatures it once destroyed, and, somewhat more sternly, she shows that nature has destructive powers perhaps greater than that of humans, but that nature can also heal and regenerate itself, and even absorb disturbing elements into itself.

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